

A landmark in the lexicography of slang in its first edition

[Francis Grose, ed.] *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*. London: S.[Samuel] Hooper, 1785. 8vo, [208] pages.

Francis Grose (ca. 1730–1791) was the son of the Swiss jeweler who created the coronation crown of George II. With assistance from his father, Grose (who developed a precocious interest in antiquities) was appointed to be Richmond Herald in the College of Arms, a post he held from 1755 to 1763. After attaining the rank of captain in the military, Grose set out to research and produce drawings for his first book, *The Antiquities of England and Wales* (1773–87), which was commercially successful. Grose’s next work, *A Guide to Health, Beauty, Riches, and Honour* (1783) contained a collection of contemporary quack advertisements with a satirical preface. In the compilation of his *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, Grose, accompanied by his amanuensis and fellow artist Tom Cocking, collected slang terms during late-night visits to London’s roughest neighborhoods and drinking establishments. Grose went on to author *A Provincial Glossary* (1787) “with a collection of local proverbs and popular superstitions,” *Rules for Drawing Caricatures* (1788), *The Antiquities of Scotland* (1789–91), and *A Treatise on Ancient Armour and Weapons* (1791). While traveling in Scotland making preparations for *The Antiquities of Scotland*, Grose made the acquaintance of poet Robert Burns and was subsequently immortalized in Burns’ “Verses on Captain Grose” and “On the late Captain Grose’s Peregrinations.” Francis Grose was a corpulent and convivial person who took great pleasure in food and drink; it is fitting that in 1791, soon after traveling to Dublin to start a book on Irish antiquities, he died at the dinner table (reputedly by choking).

Grose’s *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* contains a combination of cant terms, the secret code of thieves and villains, with a wide variety of slang words. Some of the entries — bilk, chubby, hen-pecked, topsy-turvy — are familiar to modern English speakers; others are more mysterious or obsolete, such as “circumbendibus” (a wandering path or story), “dog’s soup” (rainwater), gold finder (one who cleans outhouses), and “scandalbroth” (tea). There seem to be countless words for a prostitute (“Covent Garden

nun” among them) and varieties of criminals and conmen (“blind harper” being a beggar who feigns blindness, “diver” for a pickpocket, and “resurrection men” who stole corpses from graveyards for anatomy students).

Grose’s dictionary is preceded by cant lists going back as far as Thomas Harman’s 1567 *Caveat or Warening for Commen Cursetors*. Such works were produced to help the uninitiated protect themselves from falling victim to the criminal element in England’s burgeoning cities, and Grose, in his preface, acknowledged using several of them as sources. Following close on the heels of his 1785 first edition, the second edition of Grose’s popular dictionary appeared in 1788 and contained nearly 200 new entries. The great majority of these (80 percent) were in the first half of alphabet, suggesting that Grose lacked either the time or the patience for a thorough expansion of the original. The third edition of 1796, published five years after Grose’s death, included relatively few additions but rather significant revisions of existing definitions. As there was no editor named on the title page and no editor’s preface, the third edition is considered to reflect Grose’s amendments to the second edition.

Grose’s successors in the genre of cant and slang dictionaries include James Caulfield (*Blackguardiana*, 1795), Humphry Tristram Potter (*New Dictionary of all the Cant and Flash Language*, 1795), *Lexicon Balatronicum* (derived from Grose and published in 1811), Pierce Egan’s 1823 expanded and updated edition of Grose’s dictionary, and John Bee’s sporting slang books of 1823 and 1825. Grose’s dictionary endures in both its influence and appeal: it has been issued as a reprint at least four times during twentieth century, and once thus far (2004) in the twenty-first.

This copy of the *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* is from the Warnock Library, and it is bound in smooth tan calf. The gilt-tooled spine is divided into six compartments by raised bands; in the second compartment on a red label is the title “CLASSICAL I
DICTIONARY.” The date (1785) appears at the foot of the spine. A one-page advertisement for Grose’s *Guide to Health, Beauty, Riches, and Honour* is on the verso of the title page. There are no traces of previous ownership.

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